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GOP senators push Stivers for high-level Defense post

By Walter Andrews
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A senior Pentagon official has been summoned by Republican senators to explain his decision not to name a new deputy undersecretary to handle nuclear targeting and intelligence policy, government sources say.

Fred C. Ikle, undersecretary of defense for policy, will be asked at an April 24 luncheon meeting of the Republican Steering Committee to explain his opposition to the appointment of Ronald H. Strivers to the key post, the sources said. Mr. Stivers has the backing of a number of conservative senators for the job.

The deputy has been in charge of nuclear targeting policy, intelligence policy, emergency planning, assuring the continuity of government in the event of a nuclear war and administering lie-detector tests to those with access to top-secret information.

The former deputy, retired Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, announced in December that he planned to leave the post. The job now is being filled by an acting deputy on an interim basis. There are no plans to name a successor, Mr. Ikle said.

Eight senators said in a March 27 letter to Deputy Secretary of Defense William Taft IV, Mr. Ikle's boss, that they felt the post should be filled by Mr. Stivers.

"Ron Stivers has the experience and political philosophy to succeed General Stilwell, and carry forth his efforts of the last four years in the areas of counter-intelligence, covert action, nuclear targeting ... security disclosure [lie detector use] and the other responsibilities," the letter obtained by The Washington Times says.

The letter was signed by Sens. James A. McClure, R-Idaho; Mack Mattingly, R-Ga.; Charles E. Grassley, R-Iowa; Jacob Hecht, R-Nev.; Orrin Hatch, R-Utah; Jesse Helms, R-N.C.; Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., and Steve Symms, R-Utah.

The letter was drafted by David S. Sullivan of Sen. McClure's staff, a colleague of Mr. Stivers at the Central Intelligence Agency, Pentagon sources said. But Mr. Sullivan, in an interview, "emphatically and vehemently" denied that he had drafted the letter.

Pentagon sources who oppose Mr. Stivers' appointment to the deputy's job questioned his management ability and said he is "simply not suited" for the post.

Some of the senators who signed the letter are the strongest political supporters of Mr. Ikle in his job, the No. 3 Pentagon post. But sources said that, to the extent he opposes the nomination, Mr. Ikle may be jeopardizing his conservative political support and his own position in the Pentagon.

Mr. Ikle dismissed the possibility of the situation weakening his conservative support and described the current furor over the naming of a new deputy as "a tempest not in a teapot, but in a teaspoon."

In a telephone interview, he confirmed that he would be meeting with the Republican Steering Committee April 24 "to discuss a broad range of issues."

He has met with the committee before, and there was nothing unusual about this meeting, he said. On the naming of a successor to Gen. Stilwell, the undersecretary said there will be "no action on that score for some time to come. There is no planning going on right now for a successor."

There is no statutory, legal requirement for the job, Mr. Ikle said, and its functions could be handled "in a number of different ways." The Defense Department has a certain amount of flexibility in creating and abolishing jobs when they are not needed, he said.

In what was viewed by some as an effort to sidetrack Mr. Stivers, Mr. Ikle created a new post, called special adviser for nuclear employment policy, and named Mr. Stivers to fill it.

Mr. Stivers has yet to take over his new post, which is similar to the job he had performed as an assistant deputy undersecretary in charge of nuclear targeting policy.

Another Ikle aide, Dov S. Zakheim, also was said to be in the running for the deputy job. But, Mr. Zakheim, the sources said, had failed to line up political support to match that of Mr. Stivers. No comments could be obtained either from Mr. Stivers or Mr. Zakheim.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger is also said to have approached Graham Allison, dean of the Kennedy School of Government, about the deputy job. No comment could be obtained from Mr. Allison. The defense secretary is said to be a great admirer of Mr. Allison.

The situation took a bizarre twist a couple of weeks ago, the sources said, when a young CIA official, Phillip Kunsberg, turned up in the deputy's office and announced he was the new liaison for covert operations. His appearance gave rise to reports that Mr. Kunsberg was the new deputy.

"We would appreciate an explanation why a GS-14 from the CIA general counsel's office named Phil Kunsberg should even be considered for such [a] sensitive post in the Defense Department at this time," the senators say in their letter to Deputy Secretary Taft.

Ron Cordray contributed to this story.

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